

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY QUITO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1193

C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 5821

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (DATES IN PARAS 2,3,4,7 & 8)

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: CASC, EC, PFOR, PINT

SUBJECT: DETAINED U.S. CLERGYMEN

REF: QUITO 5788

1. THE PURPOSE OF THIS MESSAGE IS TO PROVIDE FURTHER INFORMATION TO ASSIST THE DEPARTMENT IN RESPONDING TO INQUIRES FROM THE CONGRESS AND THE PUBLIC REGARDING THE ACTIONS OF THIS EMBASSY ON BEHALF OF THE U.S. CITIZENS DETAINED ON AUGUST 13-14. FOLLOWING ARE SUMMARIES OF MY CONVERSATIONS DURING THIS AFFAIR WITH THE MINISTER OF GOVERNMENT AND THE FOREIGN MINISTER. AS THE DEPARTMENT IS ALREADY AWARE, EMBASSY OFFICIALS VISITED THE DETAINEES ON THREE OCCASIONS DURING THEIR 27 HOURS' DETENTION.

2. MY FIRST CONVERSATION WITH THE ACTING MINISTER OF GOVERNMENT WAS AT APPROXIMATELY 1 A.M. OF THE MORNING OF AUGUST 13 WHEN HE CALLED ME AT MY RESIDENCE TO INFORM ME THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD DETAINED THE PARTICIPANTS M N THE RIOBAMBA MEETING, INCLUDING FIVE AMERICANS. AT THAT TIME I EMPHASIZED TO HIM THAT I WOULD WANT A CONSULAR OFFICER TO VISIT THE DETAINEES AT THE EARLIEST
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OPPORTUNITY. AT THE TIME OF THE PHONE CALL I WAS UNDER THE IMPRESSION THAT THE CLERGYMEN WERE STILL ENROUTE FROM RIOBAMBA TO QUITO AND THEREFORE I TOLD THE MINISTER THAT I WOULD BE IN TOUCH WITH HIM FIRST THING IN THE

MORNING TO ARRANGE FOR VISITS.

3. ON THE OPENING OF BUSINESS ON AUGUST 13 I BEGAN TO SEEK CONTACT WITH THE MINISTER TO ARRANGE FOR CONSULAR VISITS AND WAS FINALLY SUCCESSFUL IN DOING SO AT APPROXIMATELY 10:30. DURING THESE TWO INITIAL CONVERSATIONS WITH THE MINISTER HE EMPHASIZED TO ME THE SUBVERSIVE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE FOUND AT THE SITE OF THE MEETING. AT THAT POINT I DID NOT BOTHER TO COMMENT, ESPECIALLY SINCE MY MAIN CONCERN WAS FOR THE WELL-BEING AND SAFETY OF THE DETAINED U.S. CITIZENS. I DID ASCERTAIN, HOWEVER, THAT THE GOVERNMENT INTENDED TO EXPEL THEM FROM THE COUNTRY AS SOON AS TRANSPORTATION COULD BE ARRANGED.

4. IN MID-AFTERNOON OF AUGUST 13 I AGAIN TELEPHONED THE MINISTER OF GOVERNMENT AND MADE THE FOLLOWING POINTS:

(A) I WAS NOT MAKING ANY FORMAL DEMARCHE TO HIM BUT RATHER OFFERING SUGGESTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS ON BEHALF OF MY FELLOW-COUNTRYMEN AND OF WHAT I FELT WOULD BE IN THE BEST INTEREST OF U.S./ECUADOREAN RELATIONS.

(B) I TOLD HIM THAT WHEN EMBASSY OFFICERS HAD INTERVIEWED THE DETAINED AMERICANS EARLIER THAT DAY THEY WERE SURPRISED TO LEARN THAT THE CLERGYMEN HAD NOT BEEN INFORMED OF THE CAUSE OF THEIR DETENTION OR OF WHEN DISPOSITION WOULD BE MADE OF THEIR CASES. I SAID THAT THIS WAS OBVIOUSLY THE CAUSE OF A GREAT DEAL OF ANXIETY FOR THEM.

(C) I ADDED THAT THEIR ANXIETY IN BEING HELD WAS NO DOUBT COMPOUNDED BY THE FACT THAT THEY HAD BEEN ROUNDED UP AT THE PLACE OF THE CONFERENCE IN A VERY THREATENING MANNER BY PEOPLE IN CIVILIAN CLOTHES BEARING A GREAT NUMBER OF WEAPONS. I SAID THAT I DID NOT SEE ANY
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JUSTIFICATION FOR THIS TYPE OF TREATMENT IN THE CASE OF PERSONS WHO OBVIOUSLY WERE IN NO POSITION TO REACT VIOLENTLY AND WHO FURTHERMORE WERE HIGH-RANKING CATHOLIC CLERGYMEN.

(D) I TOLD THE MINISTER THAT I UNDERSTOOD THAT THERE HAD BEEN INSUFFICIENT ROOMS IN THE QUARTEL FOR ALL OF THE DETAINEES THE PREVIOUS NIGHT AND THEREFORE RATHER THAN SOME BEING MORE COMFORTABLE THAN OTHERS, THEY HAD DECIDED TO SLEEP IN ONE LARGE ROOM. I THEN SUGGESTED THAT, SINCE THESE PEOPLE WERE NOT OFFICIALLY UNDER ARREST, IT WOULD BE PROPER IF THE GOVERNMENT ALLOWED THEM TO SPEND THAT NIGHT IN A HOTEL AND

THENPZO MAKE THEIR OWN ARRANGEMENTS TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY. I POINTED OUT THAT ALMOST ALL OF THEM HAD INTENDED TO DEPART ECUADOR THE WEEKEND OF AUGUST 14-15 IN ANY CASE. I SAID THAT I THOUGHT IT WAS IN THE BEST INTEREST OF ECUADOR AND OF U.S./ECUADOREAN RELATIONS THAT THESE PEOPLE NOT BE SUBJECTED TO ANY FURTHER HARASSMENT. I SAID THAT THE AMERICANS WERE HIGHLY RESPECTED CLERGYMEN IN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES AND THAT WHILE THEY UNDOUBTEDLY WERE CONCERNED WITH SOCIAL PROBLEMS, BY NO STRETCH OF THE IMAGINATION COULD BE CONSIDERED REVOLUTIONARIES OR SUBVERSIVES. THEREFORE, IT SEEMED TO ME THAT THE SMALL GESTURE SUCH AS NOW PLACING THEM AT LIBERTY MIGHT BE OF SOME HELP IN MINIMIZING THE UNDOUBTEDLY UNFAVORABLE IMPACT THAT THIS INCIDENT WOULD HAVE IN THE UNITED STATES.

5. IN REPLYING TO THESE POINTS THE MINISTER DENIED THAT AN UNDUE THREAT OF VIOLENCE HAD BEEN MADE TO ROUND UP THE CLERGYMEN AND THAT THEY COULD BE EXPECTED TO LIE ABOUT THEIR TREATMENT. HE FINALLY AGREED, HOWEVER, THAT THE CLERGYMEN COULD BE RELEASED TO SPEND THE NIGHT IN A HOTEL OR IN OTHER ACCOMODATIONS AND HE SAID THAT HE WAS MEETING WITH THE PAPAL NUNCIO AND THE CARDINAL AND WOULD DISCUSS THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH ARRANGEMENTS.

6. I HAD ONE FURTHER CONVERSATION WITH THE MINISTER SEVERAL HOURS LATER, WHEN AFTER ASCERTAINING THAT THE CLERGY-
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MEN HAD NOT YET BEEN FREED, I CALLED HIM TO URGE THAT THEY NOT BE FORCED TO SPEND ANOTHER NIGHT IN THE BARRACKS. HE INFORMED ME AT THAT POINT THAT ORDERS HAD ALREADY BEEN ISSUED FOR THEIR RELEASE.

7. I ALSO HAD A CONVERSATION REGARDING THIS SUBJECT WITH THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS ON THE NIGHT OF AUGUST 14. THE MINISTER CALLED ME ABOUT ANOTHER MATTER BUT NATURALLY THE SUBJECT OF THE CLERGYMEN CAME UP EARLY IN THE CONVERSATION. AFTER EXPRESSING HIS RELIEF THAT THE PEOPLE HAD BEEN RELEASED, HE TOLD ME THAT NEVERTHELESS IT HAD BEEN ESSENTIAL FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO TAKE ACTION. I REPLIED THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR ME TO BELIEVE THAT THE FIVE U.S. PARTICIPANTS WERE DANGEROUS SUBVERSIVES AND THAT IT HARDLY SEEMED NECESSARY FOR THE GOE TO HAVE TO TAKE SUCH EXTREME ACTION. I FURTHER COMMENTED THAT I WAS AFRAID THAT THE INCIDENT WOULD HAVE AN UNFAVORABLE IMPACT ON THE IMAGE OF THE GOE IN THE UNITED STATES. THE MINISTER STATED THAT HE TOO HAD BEEN INCREDULOUS WHEN HE FIRST HEARD OF THE POLICE ACTION BUT THAT HE HAD SEEN DOCUMENTS COMING FROM THE MEETING AND WAS NOW CONVINCED THAT IT WAS POSSIBLE FOR A CATHOLIC BISHOP

TO BE AT THE SAME TIME A COMMUNIST. I TOLD HIM THAT I WOULD BE INTERESTED IN EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE BECAUSE IT STILL WAS IMPLAUSIBLE TO ME THAT THESE PEOPLE WERE EITHER COMMUNISTS OR, MORE TO THE POINT, A THREAT TO THE STABILITY OF THIS OR OTHER GOVERNMENTS.

8. WHEN THE FIVE U.S. CITIZENS MET WITH ME AND MY STAFF JUST PRIOR TO THEIR DEPARTURE FROM QUITO ON AUGUST 14, THEY EXPRESSED THEIR GRATITUDE TO ME FOR THE EFFORTS WHICH THE EMBASSY HAD MADE ON THEIR BEHALF. THEY MADE THE SAME POINT IN THE PRESS RELEASE WHICH ALL FIVE AGREED TO USE IN THE UNITED STATES.

9. FINALLY I SHOULD NOTE THAT AS I WAS SEEING OFF THE BISHOPS AT THE QUITO AIRPORT A PHOTOGRAPHER SNAPPED A PICTURE OF ME SAYING FAREWELL TO ARCHBISHOP SANCHEZ AND BISHOP FLORES. THIS PICTURE APPEARED IN QUITO'S LEADING DAILY EL COMMERCIO THE MORNING OF AUGUST 15. I AM SURE IT HAS NOT ESCAPED THE NOTICE OF THE GOVERNMENT. AT
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LEAST I HOPE IT HASN'T.

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